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When the diagnosis is disaster: Ethics & human rights

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2007



Mass Casualty & Training

- Quality response to disaster impacted by quality of training and education of responders
- Nature of disasters has potential global impact
 - Global = borderless
 - Avian flu (H5N1) and threat of pandemic
- Questions:
 - What is essential content in education?
 - At what level of practice should such education occur?



UN Declaration on Human Rights

December 10, 1948

- Generally Assembly requested this to be disseminated, displayed and taught in schools, without regard for political status of countries, territories

- 39 articles

Affirm “inherent dignity and inalienable rights of all members of the human family”

- Act toward each other in spirit of brotherhood

- No one held in slavery

- No distinction of any kind, such as race, color, gender, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status

- Right to life, liberty, security, nationality

- Freedom of movement within borders; and freedom to go outside of borders and back again

- Family has the right to protection

- Freedom of conscience, thought, expression

- Recognition as a person in front of the law



Human Rights & Teaching Nursing

■ Human rights “assumed”

- Value of human beings central to nursing

■ Common meaning cannot be assumed

- Groups with differing status world-wide
 - Women
 - Children
 - Persons with disabilities

■ Burden of content / knowledge forces didactic choices

- Boards of nursing / accreditation requirements or limits on courses of study
- What is essential to “basic” nursing?

■ Personal “world view” involves core values, perceptions, assumptions that are rarely articulated



Ethics & Nursing

- Science of human duty; the body of rules of duty
- The rules or standards governing the conduct of a person or the members of a profession
- Systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior
 - Meta-ethics: where our moral principles come from and what they mean
 - Normative ethics regulates right & wrong conduct
 - Applied ethics: how principles apply to specific situations



An Example of Ethical Principles

- Question: Abortion
- Meta-ethics asks: Where do rights come from? What kinds of beings have rights?
- Normative ethics: Right of self-determination; Right to life
- Applied ethics: Is abortion a “right” or ethical decision if the mother’s life is in danger? If the fetus has a genetic disorder incompatible with life under any circumstance? In the case of rape or incest? If the mother has a mental defect?



Ethics in Today's News (CNN.com 05/30/07)

■ CDC: Airline passengers may have been exposed to drug-resistant Tuberculosis

■ Two flights involved:

- Air France 385 on May 12
- Czech Air 0104 on May 24

■ Should the US have stopped passenger from traveling?



Ethics as Topic for Instruction

■ Where does ethics fit into nursing curricula?

■ Assumed?

■ Subsumed?

■ Do we even need it?

■ When we send sons & daughters to college or school, what do we want them to learn?

- To graduate, thinking just like us?
- To have their own ideas and ideals?
- Do we want them to be critical thinkers?



Critical Thinking: Guide to action

Conceptualize Apply Analyze Synthesize Evaluate... information	Gathered by... Observation Experience Reflection Reasoning Communication
Based on universal intellectual values: clarity, accuracy, good reasons, precision, consistency, depth, relevance, evidence, breadth, and fairness	Entails examination of thought: purpose, concepts, empirical grounding; reasoning, assumptions, leading to conclusions, implications and alternative viewpoints



Things that make our educational and professional challenges greater

Nature of the world

- Have v. have not disparities greater (national & international)
- Global societies (> obligation)
- Incidence of disasters

Nature of nursing

- Technologically-rich in more developed countries
- 12 hour shifts \Rightarrow fatigue
- Less emphasis on time, story, touch, basic assessment (non-technologically based)
- "Time and story" at odds w/ profits-drive of corporations

Nature of health care

- Profit-focused; \$\$ driven
- Short-stays
- Greater acuity of illness
- Politically influenced

Nature of nurses

- Technology-savvy
- Technology & media influenced
 - Interest in "blood & guts"
 - Desensitized adrenalin "rush"
 - "Being with" is lesser/ less skilled care
- Interest in economic security
- Youth and lack of experience



Ethics in Instruction

- A subject for undergraduates/ diploma?
- A subject for graduates and researchers?
- Where to place it?
- How many of us have completed NIH-NCI Human Participant Protections Education for Research Teams certificate self-learning module?



Why Nurses Need to Know

■ Questions we never thought we would confront

■ Who is dead?

- How can you tell in the absence of senses?
 - In the absence of usual signs?
- What can be ask nurses to do with regard to those presumed dead?

■ Who is “qualified” to perform procedures?

- How much to involve children?
 - How alone can we leave them to make decisions?

■ Is it right to deprive nurses of physical freedom to assure care? How far can we go?

■ Who is our patient? What are we obligated to do for them?

- “The sick”?
- The family?
- Neighbors?
- Community members?



Questions of Concern to Us: Framing our behavior

- Worrying about staff productivity
- Exposing patients to ridicule? Or preserving dignity?
 - Mardi Gras costumes
- Short supplies / wrong supplies
- “Looting” vs. “Borrowing to save life”
- Broken promises (“We’re coming!”)
- Taking weapons to work
- Who to evacuate? Patients? Families? Staff?
- Hiding identity as health professional—refusing to serve? Or preserving sanity?



What we can demand to know

■ Health care facility responsibility

- For patients
- For staff
- For administration?
- For staff families/friends?

■ How can we “discharge” if they have nowhere to go? Boarder status?

- If they don't leave are they still patients? Do responsibilities to boarders change?
- Or are they human beings first?

■ Liability for behavior under duress

- Abandonment in the face of hopelessness and duty to family vs. rescue at hand?



Are there any decisions that
are not ethical at their core?



Our Responsibilities as Educators & Practitioners

- Prepare
- Consider hard questions
- Be willing to accept ambiguity
- Be willing to make decisions that are impossible
- Train students to face impossible choices
 - To plan for actions that are unthinkable
 - To articulate a rationale for what they have done
 - To face that decisions that look “right” in the moment may not be deemed “right” through lens of time
- Teach peers and students to care for each other in disaster (“Talk each other down”)
- Increase our own awareness of global realities and our role in global society
 - Venture beyond our own comfort zones
 - As ourselves “why” we believe and think as we do



Our Responsibilities

- Challenge ourselves to be informed
- Challenge ourselves to think in new ways
 - To accept our responsibilities in the world
- Challenge ourselves to change
- Encourage our sons and daughters to think and reason for themselves, and then challenge their thinking
- Make “ethics” and “human rights” part of our language and part of the way we live our lives





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